

Ohio's Prairie Landscape

The land that greeted early settlers to Ohio was an expanse of great forests, with a scattering of small and large prairie openings. Today, only fragments of those prairie openings have survived. Their beautiful grasses and prairie wildflowers may be used today in backyard gardens and public spaces.



Native Prairie Seeds and Plants

When grown from seeds, a prairie garden may take two, three or more years before flowers will appear. For the fastest growth, use container-grown plants. Seeds or plants purchased from vendors specializing in Ohio prairie species will give the best, most reliable results.

Many prairie plants are rare or endangered, which means they are protected by law from unauthorized collection. *Unless you have permission from the landowner, do not collect seeds from an existing prairie.* It is illegal to collect seeds or plants from Ohio's state nature preserves, wildlife areas and other state lands.

When using seeds, site preparation is crucial. Be sure to place seeds on bare, firm weed-free soil. To keep weeds from dominating your garden in the first few years, infrequent mowing may be necessary while the small seedling prairie plants are growing deep roots.

Choosing the Right Plants

It is wise to use only those prairie species found naturally growing in Ohio. The following is a list of some beautiful, easy-to-grow prairie plants:

Grasses

- Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)
- little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
- switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)

Forbs (wildflowers)

- butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginianum*)
- dense blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)
- false sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*)
- foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*)
- hairy sunflower (*Helianthus mollis*)
- prairie coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*)
- purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
- rough blazing star (*Liatris aspera*)
- tall coreopsis (*Coreopsis tripteris*)
- Virginia mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*)
- whorled rosinweed (*Silphium trifoliatum*)
- wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)

Maintaining your Prairie Garden

The biggest challenge for prairie gardeners is controlling weeds during the first two or three years. Prairie plants spend their early years growing deep roots, while weeds grow quickly above, crowding and shading the still-short prairie seedlings.

Weeds can be controlled using herbicides, mulching and hand weeding. Young prairie seedlings can be difficult to identify, so use care when weeding.

By the third growing season, the annual maintenance needed for most prairie gardens is the removal of last year's dead stems and leaves. In early spring, the garden should be either raked off or mowed down with a lawn mower. Re-sprouting prairie plants need warm soils and direct sunshine. Removing the previous year's stems and leaves will help new growth. The raked off prairie material makes ideal weed-suppressing mulch in other flower beds or vegetable gardens.

A mature prairie garden requires no covering, no pruning, no spraying, no irrigation and no fertilizer—saving the prairie gardener hundreds of dollars in maintenance costs and hours of labor. In fact, there will be little for you to do, but enjoy your colorful natural landscape feature!



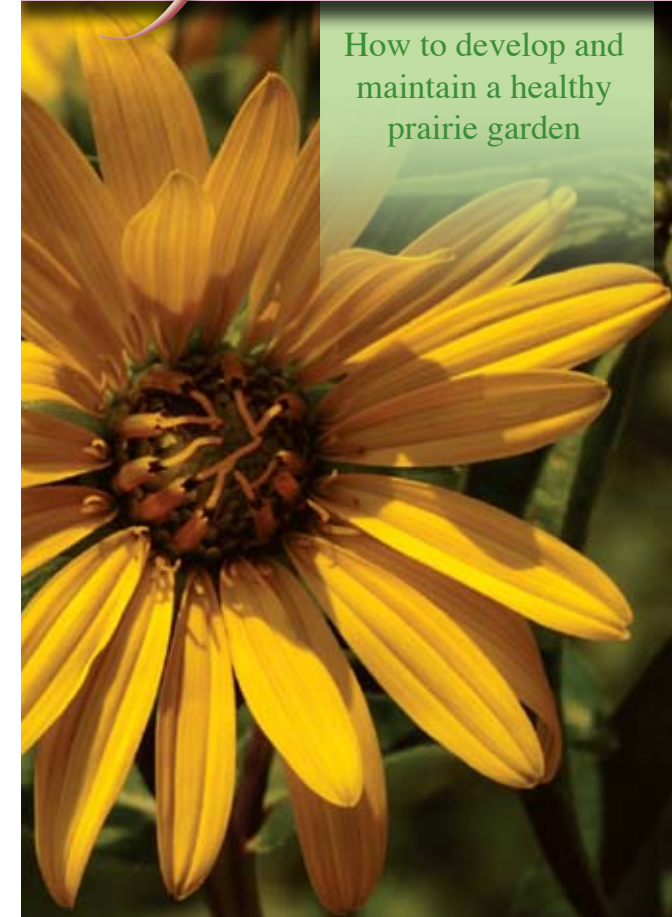
To learn more about Ohio's prairie landscapes and protected prairie state nature preserves, please visit www.ohiodnr.com/dnap.



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Making a Prairie Garden

How to develop and maintain a healthy prairie garden



Making a Prairie Garden

Choosing a Suitable Site

Create a Planting Design

- Fit the size of the plants to the size of your garden. Keep tall plants at the back.
- Planting in curves, instead of rows, will give your prairie a natural look.
- Include prairie grass clumps or clusters, which support other prairie flowers and provide wonderful winter colors and textures.
- Plant species which will provide continuous color throughout the growing season.
- Turn your prairie garden into a habitat oasis by selecting plants which are attractive to butterflies, birds and other wildlife.
- For larger prairie gardens, add a path.

Prairie gardens, regardless of size, recreate small examples of one of Ohio's most beautiful and rare ecosystems—the tallgrass prairie. Easy-to-grow prairie plants are among nature's most spectacular flowers, producing blooms



of brilliant yellows, reds and purples. Native prairie grasses and flowers are hardy species, resistant to disease, pests and drought. Most thrive in poor soils and once established, require little maintenance.

An important first step in creating a prairie garden is to choose an appropriate site. The only requirement is adequate sunlight. Direct, day-long sunlight is best, although many prairie plants can grow with a half-day's sunlight. Shaded sites, with less than a half-day of direct sunlight, will not support sun-loving prairie plants.

Prairie plants grow in three different soil types: xeric (dry), mesic (moderately moist) and hydric (wet) soils. However, they will thrive in a variety of soil textures ranging from clay to sand, and they will tolerate a wide range of soil fertility and acidity. Dry and mesic prairie plants prefer loose soil with good drainage. Wet species grow in poorly drained areas, where water stands after a heavy rain or soils are seasonally wet.

Some prairie species may visually enhance problem areas, such as soggy areas or gravel hills. Check the site requirement for each plant species before planting them at your site.

Once you've selected your site, consider developing a planting plan. Nurseries which sell prairie plants or seeds may also carry reference materials to help you select the best species for your prairie garden.

For more detailed information, consider contacting the Ohio Prairie Association at www.ohioprairie.org or check with your local Master Gardener program, often located in your county's extension office. The following tips will help you design an attractive and healthy prairie garden:

- Use only native Ohio prairie species and, when possible, purchase your plants from an Ohio nursery. Species and plants from other states are not always adapted to Ohio's soil and climate conditions.
- Match plants to your soil—xeric, mesic or hydric.

